

## Depression and physical illness

Phillips, Anna

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## Book Review

### Psychology, Health, and Medicine

Steptoe, A. (Ed) (2007). *Depression and Physical Illness*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The importance of depression in the context of disease was highlighted by a recent Lancet article indicating that depression produced the greatest decrement in health status in comparison to common chronic diseases such as angina, arthritis, asthma, and diabetes; and individuals with depression co-morbid with these other conditions had the worst health of all (Moussavi et al., 2007). Consequently, Steptoe's edited book, *Depression and Physical Illness*, is timely and deals with what is a key public health issue. With contributions from many of the key scholars in the field, this book provides an overview of the aetiology of depression, its relationship with major health conditions, and a critical discussion of the biological and behavioural mechanisms by which depression influences health.

Part one sets the scene by presenting critical discussions of the prevalence of major and minor depression in the medically ill, and the role of psychological and socio-demographic variables in the aetiology of depression. The initial chapter introduces the notion that variations in the definition and measurement of depression affect its observed prevalence, 15-61%, in the medically ill. Evidence that this is the most common psychopathology in the medically ill is presented with illustrations of the variation in incidence across different populations and settings, and the importance of diagnosis. Chapter two presents evidence of a causal role for socio-demographic and psychological factors, e.g. economic position and life events stress, in the development of depression. The complex and inter-related nature of the association between depression and such factors is highlighted.

Part two focuses on the relationship between depression and various health problems. For example, chapters three and four discuss the links between depression and coronary heart disease. First, the research evidence to date on prospective associations between depression and the aetiology of coronary heart disease is critically evaluated, and the likely bio-behavioural pathways are considered, although less attention is given to the possibility of reverse causation. Second, evidence that depression contributes to poorer prognosis in cardiac patients is discussed. At the end of chapter four, the limited success of treatments for depression in improving cardiac prognosis is highlighted, and an appeal is made for the identification of more effective therapies. Chapter five

very briefly expands on the treatments currently available for depression in cardiac patients, but paints rather a sad picture in that very few have been systematically tested in this population, and those which have yielded disappointing results in terms of cardiac morbidity and mortality. However, the importance of treating depression in these patients with the goal of increasing wellbeing is underlined. The following chapters in Part two deal with the relationship between depression and other contemporary and serious health problems in a similar way. The available evidence for links with physical disability, chronic pain, diabetes, chronic fatigue, cancer, and obesity is presented in a thorough manner, plausible mechanisms are examined, and in some cases previous and potential interventions to alleviate depression and improve health outcomes are discussed.

Part three builds on some of the bio-behavioural mechanisms mentioned earlier in the book, and presents an in depth examination of the known and posited mechanisms linking depression and health. It also covers some of the biological and behavioural processes that may contribute to the aetiology of depression. Topics include: the role of inflammatory cytokines and sickness behaviour; the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, specifically the role of cortisol and DHEA; the biological and behavioural mechanisms by which depression can influence immune function; and the links between depression and a range of behavioural factors such as smoking, physical activity and adherence to medical advice. In this section, the bidirectional nature of the links between depression and ill-health are addressed somewhat, providing a different perspective than presented thus far in the text. For example, chapter 12 suggests that mood changes can be a result of the effect on the brain of immune mediators (such as inflammatory cytokines) involved in the underlying physiology of many physical disorders. The introduction and definition of depression given at the start of many of these chapters mean that the reader can dip in and out of the book, and focus on specific topics of interest.

In the final section and chapter the Editor summarises the evidence presented in the book, and discusses how the evidence from the literature on depression and each specific physical illness are underpinned by three main models: an antecedent model where depression contributes to the aetiology of disease, mediated by biological and behavioural factors; a consequence model where physical illness results in depression, potentially mediated by biological and behavioural factors associated with the physical illness; and a shared determinants model where variables such as low socioeconomic position, genetics, and childhood adversity predict both depression and physical illness, again mediated biological and behavioural factors, but that depression and physical illness are not causally related. The importance of identifying depression is emphasised, and how to

integrate this theoretical knowledge into the treatment of depression is presented as the next challenge.

Given the wealth of data presented, and the depth of critical discussion of both the methodologies and mechanisms by which the depression and physical health are measured and interrelated, this book would be a valuable supplementary source for academics and graduate students in the areas of Psychology, Public Health, Medicine, and related fields. However, in addition to presenting relatively recent data from a variety of sources and study designs, this book is peppered with information about contemporary research on the management of depression in medically ill individuals. This is presented as being a useful aid for health professionals and clinicians and indeed, although the book is not a practical training guide, it will certainly help to contribute to the understanding of the prevalence, impact, and management of this ubiquitous and significant condition.

Anna C. Phillips, PhD, CPsychol Health.  
Behavioural Medicine Group  
School of Sport & Exercise Sciences  
University of Birmingham

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